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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNOSC/OSCE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000616

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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)  
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S LEADING NEWSPAPER BARRED FROM OFFICE,  
EFFECTIVELY SHUT DOWN

REF: BAKU 500

Classified By: ACTING DCM JOAN POLASCHIK PER 1.4(B,D)

¶1. (U) On May 20, employees of the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES) - citing structural deficiencies with the building - shut down the offices of Realny Azerbaijan and Gundelik Azerbaijan newspapers. (NOTE: Realny Azerbaijan is the country's highest-circulation newsmagazine.) Although the printing press is at a separate location, because the MES has prevented staff members from accessing their equipment, the newspapers have been effectively shut down. Editor-In-Chief of the newspapers, Eynulla Fatullayev, is currently serving a 30-month prison sentence on criminal libel charges for allegedly penning some controversial comments related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (ref).

¶2. (SBU) PAO monitored the late-night May 20 process, during which MES representatives closed and sealed the offices of Realny Azerbaijan and Gundelik Azerbaijan. Despite protests from journalists, editors, and human rights activists who had assembled at the offices, the MES officials claimed that the offices had to be closed because they were "unsafe" and did not comply with local fire and safety regulations. (NOTE: It appears that none of the other offices or apartments in the ten-story building were served notice or closed.) PAO spoke with the MES officials on the scene, arguing that failure to postpone this decision would lead the international community to view the decision as political pressure on an independent media organization. At the same time, a few young "sportsmen" appeared on the scene and tried to instigate a conflict with journalists present, but several human rights activists quickly intervened to prevent the situation from getting out of hand. The acting editor of Realny Azerbaijan asked PAO for assistance in securing access to equipment and files so that the two media outlets could continue to operate and print their newspapers.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: We are extremely concerned by the deteriorating media situation. The closure of Realny Azerbaijan's and Gundelik Azerbaijan's offices appears to have been politically motivated, and is reminiscent of the GOAJ's November 2006 crackdown on other independent media outlets. Coupled with the imprisonment of seven journalists, the harassment and beatings of others, as well as the myriad lawsuits against journalists and media outlets, this points to a disturbing trend against media freedom. We will continue to raise our concerns with all levels of GOAJ interlocutors, and plan to release an Embassy statement on the closure on May 22 (draft sent to EUR/CARC by e-mail).  
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